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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000951

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/WERNER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: THE OTHER HARIRI SON PREFERS AOUN TO
HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a 3/24 meeting with the Ambassador, Baha' Hariri -- Rafiq Hariri's eldest son, who was passed over for politics in favor of second son Sa'ad -- expressed pessimism about Lebanon's current political deadlock. Convinced that the utility of the current national dialogue had run its course, Baha' expressed consternation about the competitive courting of Hizballah. As Hizballah in his view poses a greater threat to Lebanon's future than President Emile Lahoud, Baha' was bewildered by the obsession on the part of the March 14 forces with the presidency. Instead, he believed March 14 needed to come to terms with Michel Aoun, in order to corner Hizballah and force disarmament. While he did not see March 14 prepared to give Aoun -- "a crazy man" -- the presidency, he thought that March 14 should concede a large part of a new cabinet to Aoun and his allies, in order to reassure the Christians and pull them away from their alliance with the Shia. He endorsed continuation of Fouad Siniora's tenure as prime minister. Like it or not, Baha' argued, the Christians see the Sunnis as bigger threats to their presence in Lebanon than the Shia. The only way the Sunnis can convince the Christians that they do not seek domination at their expense is to embrace Michel Aoun. End summary.

MARCH 14 COALITION FALTERING;
POLITICAL LIFE IN DEADLOCK

12. (C) In a rare appearance in Beirut, Baha' Hariri came to the Embassy on 3/24, visiting the consular section for a visa and meeting the Ambassador. Peppering his conversation with words of wisdom attributed to his assassinated father, Baha' lamented that the March 14 movement, to which he pledged allegiance, had faltered. A year ago, the March 14 movement comprised 70 percent of the country -- everyone except the Shia parties (Amal and Hizballah) and assorted allies and lackeys of Syria. Today, March 14 musters a mere half of the population, due to Michel Aoun's success in playing on populist Christian fears to draw people away from March 14.

13. (C) This split, Baha' argued, has led to a deadlock. The country is at a standstill, with March 14 unable to overcome the resistance of the alliance of Michel Aoun and Hizballah to any positive initiative. After some initial positive results, the national dialogue is now stalled as well, turned into a process that will not yield results but out of which no one can escape, lest he be accused of

torpedoing the dialogue. To break this deadlock, both Michel Aoun and the March 14 alliance are courting Hizballah in hopes of prevailing against the other. Baha' said that this competition for Hizballah's affections disgusted him.

OBSESSION ON PRESIDENCY A MISTAKE;
HIZBALLAH DISARMAMENT SHOULD BE FOCUS

¶4. (C) A basic problem, Baha' said, is that both March 14 and Michel Aoun are focused on the wrong issue. They are obsessed with the presidency. This obsession drives them into the arms of Hizballah. "I would love to kick out Lahoud today," Baha' said, "but you can't do it" with the current political alignment. So one should just leave a discredited and isolated Lahoud in office -- "who cares?" -- and concentrate instead on what really matters to Lebanon's future: the arms of Hizballah. The Lebanese state will never be strong, and Lebanon will never enjoy full sovereignty and international credibility, as long as an Iranian-funded Syrian proxy maintains a heavily armed presence within Lebanon. Hizballah disarmament is a far more important issue, Baha' argued, than Emile Lahoud.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Hizballah disarmament might be easier with Lahoud removed, given that Lahoud has provided shameless protection to Hizballah. Aren't people focusing in part on Lahoud's removal in order to remove a key obstacle to Hizballah disarmament? Baha' agreed that would be the case "in a perfect world." But he repeated his argument that it is impossible to remove Lahoud now, "unless you put in someone who is just as bad." He counseled setting aside the question of Lahoud for now in favor of concentrating on Hizballah disarmament.

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MARCH 14 SHOULD GIVE AOUN
CABINET POSITIONS NOW

¶6. (C) Concentrating on Hizballah disarmament requires the March 14 alliance to mend fences with Michel Aoun, "as hard as that is," Baha' argued. Michel Aoun needs to be convinced that he can get more from March 14 than he can from Hizballah in order to get him to back off from his alliance with Hizballah. The Ambassador noted that Aoun's price is clearly marked: a guarantee that he will succeed Emile Lahoud. Baha', describing Michel Aoun as a "crazy man," said that he thought Aoun would be satisfied with a significant cabinet role for the time being, if he knew that no moves would be made to replace Lahoud for now. March 14 should work with Aoun to form a new, stronger cabinet that includes Aoun. And then the alliance between March 14 and Aoun could be used to corner Hizballah and force an agreement on disarmament. The Ambassador noted that Aoun would insist on a large share of the cabinet. "So would I," Baha' said. "And we should give them to him," dropping the Christians like Nayla Mouawad and Jihad Azour who "have no Christian constituency" in order to free positions for Aoun.

SINIORA "BEST" FOR PM JOB

¶7. (C) Asked about his pick for prime minister in his hypothetical a new cabinet, Baha' responded that Fouad Siniora was the best possibility. He said that his father had only three close friends and advisors, but all three were consulted on all major decisions: Siniora, former Minister of Justice Bahej Tabbarah, and Paris-based attorney Basile Yared. Asked about the reported enmity between Yarid and Siniora, Baha' attributed it to "jealousy as much as anything." The Ambassador commented that it's not always clear that Siniora has the full backing of the Hariri house. Baha' repeated simply that Siniora was the best possibility.

(Note: According to the ever-active Beirut rumor mills, Rafiq's widow -- and Baha's step mother -- Nazek Hariri detests Siniora. Reasons given vary from Nazek's alleged dislike of Siniora's wife Houda, Nazek's known friendship with Tabbarah who she wanted as PM, and Nazek's supposed wish to be PM herself.)

'NATURAL' THAT CHRISTIANS GO TO AOUN,
AND THAT AOUN GOES TO HIZBALLAH

18. (C) Asked why he thought March 14 had lost Christian support to Aoun, Baha' thought that it was natural, given the March 14 behavior. Lebanon's Christians, he said, did not feel like equal partners in a bloc dominated by the Future bloc (Rafiq Hariri's Sunni-dominated political machine) and Walid Jumblatt. The Christians felt uneasy, that they were being railroaded into decisions made by Sunni and Druse politicians without reference to their interests or input. Moreover, the Qornet Shehwan elite in the March 14 bloc seemed out of touch with the Christian street and came across as irrelevant, given the dominance of Future and Jumblatt. Samir Ja'ja' ("a criminal") does have a street following, but it is minimal compared to Michel Aoun's.

19. (C) It is also natural, Baha' continued, that Aoun would have taken his Christian bloc into an alliance with Hizballah. Lebanon's Christians see the Sunnis as posing an existential threat to their continued role in Lebanon. The Sunnis are wealthy and they are the majority in the region. The Sunni prime minister has taken powers from the Christian presidency. The Shia, by contrast, are a minority here, and they tended to be weak and impoverished in Lebanon. They pose less of a threat to Lebanese Christendom. By combining forces with the Shia, the Christians under Aoun may feel that they can more easily corner the Sunnis. March 14 needs to come up with ways to show the Christians that Lebanon's Sunnis accept full partnership with the Christians. Bringing Aoun into the cabinet is the only possibility for doing so. Ja'ja' cannot substitute for Aoun as a Christian leader.

COMMENT

110. (C) Baha' carefully avoided any criticism of his younger brother Sa'ad -- in fact, he avoided altogether even mentioning his brother's name. Part of his criticism of March 14 probably stems from bruised feelings, as the Hariri

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family passed over Rafiq's eldest in order to pass the political baton to the more charismatic Sa'ad. (While we share his admiration for Fouad Siniora, we have to wonder if Baha' finds it easier to accept a Siniora premiership than one held by his brother. But maybe we have read too many bad psychobabble novels.) Unfortunately, Baha's criticism of the behavior of the March 14 leadership toward the Christians a year ago is accurate. The fact that Jumblatt and Sa'ad were making decisions (sometimes -- as in the election law -- even in collusion with Nabih Berri and Hassan Nasrallah) did, in fact, make many Christians uneasy and easily exploitable by Michel Aoun's populist rhetoric.

111. (C) Like Baha', we, too, find the flirtation -- both by Sa'ad and by Michel Aoun -- with Hizballah to be unseemly. But it appears as though Baha's objections, primarily rooted in a legitimate concern about Hizballah's arms, also seemed to have been flavored with Sunni paranoia about Shia influence. Unfortunately, his solution, to bring Aoun and March 14 into an alliance in order to corner Hizballah, seems unrealistic in the current atmosphere.

FELTMAN